



Conservation Superstars

March 2015 Snapshots

Mike and Mary Mueller own 360 acres in Bismark Township in Sibley County that are mostly protected in Perpetual Conservation Easements. In addition to farming and pasturing in small amounts, the Muellers have a solar project that meets their electric needs for the year, experiment with pollinators, serve as a resource by opening up their farm for schools and community programs, and volunteer at conservation and wildlife organizations. In short, the Muellers are conservation superstars.

The Muellers received the Conservationist of the Year – Pioneer Award from the Minnesota Waterfowl Association on Feb. 7, 2015 for their passionate work in conservation for over three decades. But conservation wasn't always a focus for the Muellers.



When Mike Mueller returned home to his family farm after military service and college, he noticed changes. Due to a tough economy, farmers had been trying to maximize profit, which led to prominent drainage, disappearing fencerows, and less area to trap, hunt, and view wildlife - activities Mike had enjoyed as a child. Mike and his wife Mary worked the farm as best they could for years, but saw little improvement.

In 1987, Mike and Mary enrolled their first 15 acres into BWSR's Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program. "This was the start of bringing the three Ms – muskrats, mallards, and mink – back on the farm," said Mike.

Gradually, the Muellers transformed their property through additional conservation efforts with the help of several programs and agencies, including BWSR, Sibley Soil and Water Conservation District, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, Minnesota Waterfowl Association, Natural Resources Conservation Service, DNR, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and others. Of BWSR's programs, the Muellers have participated in three wetland banking easements, three Reinvest in Minnesota/Wetland Reserve Program (RIM/WRP) partnership easements, one Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) easement, and several enrollments into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).



Top, Mike and Mary Mueller. Bottom: A group gathers for a tour of the Mueller property.

Their efforts have brought amazing results. Slowly, the wildlife has returned to the heavily-farmed area, including rare species such as an ibis and a pair of swans that a neighbor remembered seeing every year as a little girl. During heavy rains in June 2014, the Muellers' property held almost all of its water, preventing flood damage and erosion, and sediment deposit into the water system.

“We are glad that conservation was not our original goal, because it would have seemed to be an unachievable task,” said Mike. “However, we have enjoyed the journey.”

The Muellers say they are committed not only to conservation but also to management of the property. “We manage the properties to benefit wildlife, store water on the land, and reduce wind and water erosion,” said Mary. “This work is a true passion for both of us.”